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ABSTRACT

Designed to measure the ability of children to identify the meanings of structurally ambiguous or unambiguous sentences of English, the test consists of forty lead sentences: ten with surface structure ambiguity, ten with underlying structure ambiguity, and twenty which are unambiguous. For each of the lead sentences three interpretative sentences were constructed, one, two, or all three of which gave a meaning of the lead sentence. [This document is one of those reviewed in The Research Instruments Project (TRIP) monograph, "Measures for Research and Evaluation in the English Language Arts" to be published by the Committee on Research of the National Council of Teachers of English in cooperation with the ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills. A TRIP review which precedes the document lists its category (Reading), title, author, date, and age range (intermediate), and describes the instrument's purpose and physical characteristics.] (RB)

NCTE Committee on Research

The Research Instruments Project (TRIP)

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in the English Language Arts

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CS 201 320

NATIONAL COUNCIL OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH
1111 KENYON ROAD
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Category: Reading

Title: Sentence Interpretation Test (SIT)

Author: Peter S. Little

Age Range: Intermediate

Description of the Instrument:

Purpose - to measure the ability of children to identify the meanings of structurally ambiguous or unambiguous sentences of English.

Date of Construction - 1972

Physical Description - The test consists of forty lead sentences: ten with surface structure ambiguity, ten with underlying structure ambiguity, and twenty which were unambiguous. For each of these lead sentences three interpretative sentences were constructed, one, two, or all three of which gave a meaning of the lead sentence. An example of a complete test item is given below.

	GIVES A MEANING	DOES NOT GIVE A MEANING
BOYS LIKE ICE CREAM BETTER THAN GIRLS.		
(a) It is ice cream that boys like better than they like girls.	_____	_____
(b) Boys like ice cream better than girls like boys.	_____	_____
(c) Boys like ice cream better than girls like ice cream.	_____	_____

The construction of the lead sentences for the SIT was based upon an analysis of the syntactic structures that occurred in the structurally ambiguous sentences used by MacKay (1966), MacKay and Bever (1967), and Jurgens (1971). This analysis revealed that the types of syntactic structures in which the ambiguity was located differed absolutely between those sentences classified as containing

surface structure ambiguity and those classified as containing underlying structure ambiguity. Provision was made for these types of structure to occur equally in all types of sentences included in the tests. Five main structures for both types of structurally ambiguous sentences were identified. These were as follows:

(a) Surface Structure Ambiguities

1. Adjective + Noun + Noun - where the element Noun + Noun may be interpreted as a compound noun, in which case the Adjective modifies the second Noun in the compound noun, or where both Nouns are distinct, in which case the Adjective modifies the first Noun. e.g., He was an American art expert.

2. Adverb/Adjective - where one word which may function as either an Adverb or an Adjective may be interpreted alternately. e.g., The blue dress particularly interested her.

3. Prepositional Phrase - where the Prepositional Phrase may be interpreted as modifying either a preceding noun or a preceding verb. e.g., He painted the picture on the patio.

4. Adjective + $Noun_1$ + and + $Noun_2$ - where the Adjective may be interpreted as modifying only $Noun_1$ or, by a common-elements deletion transformation, as modifying both $Noun_1$ and $Noun_2$. e.g., Little boys and girls enjoy watching fireworks.

5. $Noun_1$ + $Noun_2$ - where one Noun immediately following another in a terminal string may be interpreted as either a compound noun or two separate nouns. e.g., He told her baby stories.

(b) Underlying Structure Ambiguities

1. Infinitive - where the infinitive may be interpreted as "transitive" with an unspecified object, or as "intransitive" with "be" deleted. e.g., The lamb is too hot to eat.

2. Verb+ing + Noun - where Verb+ing may be interpreted as part of a verbal or as an adjective modifying the following Noun. e.g., He disliked visiting relatives.

3. Genitive Construction - where the genitive may be interpreted as deriving from an underlying structure of the form That + Determiner + Noun + Verb + Something or from an underlying structure of the form That + Determiner + Noun + be + Verb. e.g., The manager's selection was announced.

4. Infinitive + Verb+ing - where Verb+ing may be interpreted either as part of the verbal containing the Infinitive or as a nominalization which functions as the object of the Infinitive. e.g., The police were asked to stop drinking.

5. Comparative Deletion - where the deleted elements in a comparison may be interpreted as being either the Subject + Verb of the sentence or the Verb + Object of the sentence. e.g., Boys like tennis better than girls.

As a basis for constructing the lead sentences, those structures characteristic of surface structure ambiguity were randomly paired with those characteristic of underlying structure ambiguity.

Pairing	Structure Characteristics of Surface Structure Ambiguity	Structure Characteristics of Underlying Structure Ambiguity
1.	Adj + N + N	Infinitive
2.	Adv/Adj	Ving + N
3.	Prep Phrase	Genitive
4.	Adj + N_1 + and + N_2	Infinitive + V ing
5.	N_1 + N_2	Comparative Deletion

Forty lead sentences were then constructed such that there were eight lots of five sentences each. Two of each of the eight lots were surface structure ambiguities, two were underlying structure

ambiguities, and four were unambiguous. These were designated as Types 1 to 8 according to the nature of the structures that they contained.

A summary of the basic structural design of these eight types of sentences and the SIT item numbers corresponding to each type are given below.

Sentence Type	Sentence Structure Design	Test Item No's
1	surface structure ambiguity + unambiguous structure characteristic of underlying structure ambiguity	10,26,27,33,37
2	underlying structure ambiguity + unambiguous structure characteristic of surface structure ambiguity	4,16,18,39,40
3	unambiguous instances of these structures occurring in Type 1 sentences	3,6,11,21,35
4	unambiguous instances of these structures occurring in Type 2 sentences	5,7,15,25,30
5	surface structure ambiguity + optional structure	9,13,17,19,20
6	underlying structure ambiguity + optional structure	1,2,22,28,31
7	unambiguous instances of those structures occurring in Type 5 sentences	8,12,23,32,38
8	unambiguous instances of those structures occurring in Type 6 sentences	14,24,29,34,36

Other considerations that affected the construction of these lead sentences and which were controlled are sentence length, vocabulary, grammatical and semantic acceptability, and the consistency with which these sentences could be classified as ambiguous or unambiguous by mature native speakers of English.

Three other sentences were then constructed for each lead sentence such that either one, two, or all three of these sentences gave a paraphrased meaning of the lead sentence. For all ambiguous lead

sentences, two of the three sentences gave a meaning, representing both interpretations of the ambiguity. To avoid any overt pattern to the number of correct responses for each item, this number was varied for the unambiguous sentences. Thus, for the unambiguous lead sentences constructed to parallel the syntactic complexity of those lead sentences containing surface structure ambiguity, four were randomly assigned to have only one of the three interpretative sentences give a meaning, four more were assigned to have all three of the interpretative sentences give a meaning, and the remaining two were assigned to have two of the three interpretative sentences give a meaning. The same procedure was followed for the unambiguous sentences constructed to parallel the syntactic complexity of those lead sentences containing underlying structure ambiguity. Each of these interpretative sentences was constructed such that the least possible change was made in the wording of the lead sentence to represent the required meaning. In no instance were any content words introduced into the interpretative sentences that did not occur in the lead sentence. The ordering of the interpretative sentences was randomized for each lead sentence and the lead sentences themselves were randomized with the exception that no two pairings of the same type were permitted to immediately follow one another. This precaution was taken as it was felt that two sentences of similar structure occurring together might influence the interpretation of each other.

Validity, Reliability and Normative Data: Normative data were obtained from 60 grade five students (30 boys and 30 girls). The means for the total test, unambiguous sentences, ambiguous sentences, surface structure ambiguities, underlying structure ambiguities (with the possible scores in brackets), respectively were: 17.78(40), 11.97(20), 5.85(20), 3.48(10), 2.37(10). Face validity is claimed for the SIT and is discussed under the

following headings; a) structurally ambiguous sentences differ from unambiguous sentences, b) sentences with surface structure ambiguity differ from sentences with underlying structure ambiguity, c) sentences that are paraphrases of each other have the same deep structure, d) the students choice of the correct interpretative sentences for the lead sentences indicates that they have recovered the deep structures and thus the meanings of that lead sentence, e) vocabulary is carefully controlled, f) the sentences are grammatically and semantically acceptable as adjudged by a panel of mature, educated, native speakers of English and again borne out by the pilot study and interview. Reliability was calculated by the split-half method. The resultant correlation was .722 which when corrected by the Spearman-Brown prophecy formula increased to .839. In 1973, Montague used the SIT in a research study and revised three of the items (11,14,24). The three revised items are listed at the end of the test.

Ordering Information:

EDRS

Related Documents:

Little, Peter S. An Investigation into the Relationship Between Structural Ambiguity and Reading Comprehension. Unpublished Masters Thesis, The University of Alberta, Edmonton, 1972.

Jurgens, J.M. Perception of Lexical and Structural Ambiguity by Junior and Senior High School Students. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation. George Peabody College, 1971.

MacKay, D.G. To End Ambiguous Sentences. Perception and Psychophysics. 1966, I, 426-436.

MacKay, D.G. and T.G. Bever. In Search of Ambiguity. Perception and Psychophysics. 1967, 2, 193-200.

Montague, Mikell J. The Relationship of Sentence and Contextual Ambiguity to Reading Comprehension. Unpublished M. Ed. Thesis, The University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, 1974.

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Peter S. Little
"Sentence Interpretation Test (SIT)"
1972

SENTENCE INTERPRETATION TEST

Name _____ Date of Birth _____

School _____ Grade _____

Instructions:

Normally, the sentences that you read have only one meaning, but sometimes can have more than one meaning. This test is designed to see how well you can understand the meaning of meanings of a sentence. In each question a lead sentence is typed in capital letters and underlined. Below this sentence are three more sentences labelled a), b), and c). These sentences may give one or more meanings of the lead sentence. Take each one in turn, compare it to the lead sentence, and decide whether it does give a meaning of the lead sentence or does not give a meaning. For each one that does, put a tick under the column marked GIVES A MEANING, and for each one that doesn't, put a tick under the column marked DOES NOT GIVE A MEANING. Look at these examples:

	GIVES A MEANING	DOES NOT GIVE A MEANING
Ex. 1: HE KNEW THAT BURNING PAPER COULD BE DANGEROUS.		
a) He knew that burning could be dangerous to paper.	____	✓
b) He knew that paper which was burning could be dangerous.	✓	____
c) He knew that it could be dangerous to burn paper.	✓	____
Ex. 2: THE ANGRY CAT WAS CHASING THE DOG.		
a) The angry dog was being chased		

	GIVES A MEANING	DOES NOT GIVE A MEANING
by the cat.	____	✓
b) The dog was chasing the angry cat.	____	✓
c) It was the angry cat that was chasing the dog.	✓	____

Ex. 3: SAM PAINTED THE PICTURE IN THE KITCHEN.

a) The picture that Sam painted was in the kitchen.	____	____
b) What Sam painted was the picture of the kitchen.	____	____
c) It was in the kitchen that Sam painted the picture.	____	____

The lead sentence in Ex. 3 could have two meanings - either that the picture was in the kitchen, or that Sam did the painting in the kitchen. It does not mean that Sam painted the picture of the kitchen. Thus you should have put a tick by a) and c) under GIVES A MEANING, and a tick by b) under DOES NOT GIVE A MEANING.

Remember that in the test sometimes only one, sometimes two, and sometimes all three sentences will give a meaning for the lead sentence. You will have as much time as you need to finish.

	GIVES A MEANING	DOES NOT GIVE A MEANING
1. THE HUNTER WAS TOO FAR AWAY TO SEE.		
a) The hunter was too far away to be seen.	____	____
b) The hunter was too far away from something to see it.	____	____
c) The hunter who was seen was too far away.	____	____

	GIVES A MEANING	DOES NOT GIVE A MEANING
2. THE CHOICE OF THE STUDENTS SURPRISED THE PARENTS.		
a) What surprised the parents was the students who were chosen.	____	____
b) It was the choice made by the parents that surprised the students.	____	____
c) The choice made by the students surprised the parents.	____	____
3. HE WANTED TO FIND THE FRONT DOOR KEY.		
a) It was the front door key that he wanted to find.	____	____
b) He wanted to find the front door for the key.	____	____
c) He wanted to find the key for the front door.	____	____
4. ONLY THOSE LADIES WHO LIKED GROWING FLOWERS CAME.		
a) Only those ladies who were like growing flowers came.	____	____
b) Only those ladies came who liked flowers that are growing.	____	____
c) It was only those ladies who liked to grow flowers that came.	____	____
5. THE TIGER'S ROAR WAS HEARD DURING THE NIGHT.		
a) It was heard that the tiger had roared during the night.	____	____
b) During the roar of the night the tiger was heard.	____	____
c) The roar of the tiger was heard during the night.	____	____
6. YOUNG BILLY AND DAD LIKE TO GO FISHING.		
a) What young Billy likes is for Dad to go fishing.	____	____
b) Dad likes young Billy to go fishing.	____	____
c) It is young Billy and Dad who like to go fishing.	____	____

	GIVES A MEANING	DOES NOT GIVE A MEANING
7. ONLY THOSE BOYS WHO WANTED WRITING PAPER STAYED.		
a) Only those boys who wanted to write a paper stayed.	____	____
b) It was only those boys who wanted paper for writing that stayed.	____	____
c) Only those boys stayed who wanted paper that was for writing.	____	____
8. SOME STORES SELL NEW TOYS AND NEW BOOKS.		
a) New toys and new books are sold by some stores.	____	____
b) Some stores sell new books and new toys.	____	____
c) It is new toys and new books that some stores sell.	____	____
9. A SMALL BOAT ENGINE WAS SOLD TO THE CAPTAIN.		
a) To the captain was sold an engine for a small boat.	____	____
b) A small engine for a boat was sold to the captain.	____	____
c) A small boat and an engine were sold to the captain.	____	____
10. HE THREW HER DOG BISCUITS RATHER THAN CANDIES.		
a) It was dog biscuits that he threw her rather than candies.	____	____
b) He threw candies to her rather than dog biscuits.	____	____
c) He threw biscuits rather than candies to her dog.	____	____
11. THE VISITING NURSE ASKED HOW THE OLD MAN WAS.		
a) The nurse who was visiting asked how old the man was.	____	____
b) The visiting nurse was asked how the old man was.	____	____
c) The visiting nurse asked how the man who was old was.	____	____

	GIVES A MEANING	DOES NOT GIVE A MEANING
12. IT FELL TO THE GROUND WITH A CRASH.		
a) It was with a crash that it fell to the ground.	____	____
b) It crashed and then it fell to the ground.	____	____
c) It fell with a crash to the ground.	____	____
13. HE TOLD HER BABY STORIES IN THE EVENING.		
a) Baby stories were what he told her in the evening.	____	____
b) She told him baby stories in the evening.	____	____
c) In the evening he told stories to her baby.	____	____
14. THE BOX WAS TOO HIGH UP TO REACH.		
a) Someone was too high up to reach the box.	____	____
b) The box was too high up to be reached.	____	____
c) The box that was reached was too high up.	____	____
15. MOM LIKES SEA FOOD BETTER THAN MEAT.		
a) Meat is what Mom likes better than sea food.	____	____
b) It is meat that Mom likes better than she likes sea food.	____	____
c) Mom likes sea food better than she likes meat.	____	____
16. THE YOUNG SCIENCE STUDENT IS THE ONE TO ASK.		
a) The young science student is the one who should do the asking.	____	____
b) The young science student was the one who asked.	____	____
c) The one who should be asked is the young science student.	____	____

	GIVES A MEANING	DOES NOT GIVE A MEANING
17. SHE SPOKE TO THE BOY WITH A SMILE.		
a) She smiled and then she spoke to the boy.	____	____
b) The boy with a smile was the one to whom she spoke.	____	____
c) She was smiling when she spoke to the boy.	____	____
18. THE NEW TEACHER AND TOM WANTED TO START SKATING.		
a) It was skating that the new teacher and Tom wanted to start.	____	____
b) The new teacher and Tom were going to skate and they wanted to start.	____	____
c) The new teacher wanted Tom to start the skating.	____	____
19. MOST PEOPLE WEAR CLEAN SOCKS AND SHOES.		
a) Most people wear shoes and clean socks.	____	____
b) Most people wear socks and clean shoes.	____	____
c) It is clean socks and clean shoes that most people wear.	____	____
20. HER BEST FRIEND HAD LEFT EARLY TONIGHT.		
a) Tonight her friend had best leave early.	____	____
b) Early tonight was when her best friend had left.	____	____
c) Tonight her best friend had left early.	____	____
21. SHE WANTED A CANDY BAR MORE THAN A POP.		
a) She wanted a bar of candy more than she wanted a pop.	____	____
b) It was a candy bar that she wanted more than a pop.	____	____
c) What she wanted more than a pop was a candy bar.	____	____

	GIVES A MEANING	DOES NOT GIVE A MEANING
22. THE DOG FOUND TOM MORE QUICKLY THAN BOBBY.		
a) It was Bobby who was found by the dog more quickly than Tom.	____	____
b) The dog found Tom more quickly than the dog found Bobby.	____	____
c) The dog found Tom more quickly than Bobby found Tom.	____	____
23. A NEW WRIST WATCH WAS GIVEN TO THE WINNER.		
a) The winner was given a new wrist watch.	____	____
b) A wrist watch that was new was given to the winner.	____	____
c) What was given to the winner was a new wrist watch.	____	____
24. MOST ANIMALS THAT SWIM LIKE CATCHING FISH.		
a) Fish like catching most animals that swim.	____	____
b) Most animals that swim like to catch fish.	____	____
c) It is most animals that swim that catch like fish.	____	____
25. LITTLE JACK AND GRANDFATHER DECIDED TO GO CAMPING.		
a) It was decided by little Jack and Grandfather than they go camping.	____	____
b) To go camping was what little Jack and Grandfather decided.	____	____
c) Grandfather and little Jack decided to go camping.	____	____
26. HE WENT TO FETCH THE RED CRAYON BOX.		
a) He went to fetch the box for red crayons.	____	____
b) It was the red box for crayons that he went to fetch.	____	____
c) He went to fetch the red crayons for the box.	____	____

	GIVES A MEANING	DOES NOT GIVE A MEANING
27. THE DANCING TEENAGERS KNEW HOW GOOD MUSIC SOUNDED.		
a) The dancing teenagers knew how to sound good at music.	____	____
b) The dancing teenagers knew how good the sound of music was.	____	____
c) The teenagers who were dancing knew how music which is good sounded.	____	____
28. THE PRINCIPAL ASKED THE TEACHERS TO STOP SMOKING.		
a) The principal asked the teachers to stop others from smoking.	____	____
b) Other people were smoking and the teachers asked the principal to stop them.	____	____
c) The teachers were smoking and the principal asked them to stop.	____	____
29. THE CAT DRINKS MILK FASTER THAN THE BABY.		
a) It is the cat that drinks milk faster than the baby.	____	____
b) The cat drinks milk faster than the baby drinks milk.	____	____
c) Milk is drunk faster by the cat than by the baby.	____	____
30. THE WHITE RACE HORSE WAS THE FIRST TO FINISH.		
a) The white race horse was the one that finished first.	____	____
b) The first to finish was the race horse that was white.	____	____
c) It was the white race horse that was first to finish.	____	____
31. MOST PEOPLE WHO SHOP LIKE PLEASING SALESMEN.		
a) Salesmen who are pleasing are liked by most people who shop.	____	____
b) Most people who shop like to please		

	GIVES A MEANING	DOES NOT GIVE A MEANING
salesmen.	____	____
c) Salesmen like pleasing most people who shop.	____	____
32. MY OLD UNCLE HAD WORKED HARD TODAY.		
a) It was my old uncle who had worked hard today.	____	____
b) Today was when my old uncle had worked hard.	____	____
c) Today my old uncle had worked hard.	____	____
33. LITTLE CATS AND DOGS LIKE TO GO EXPLORING.		
a) Cats and little dogs like to go exploring.	____	____
b) Little cats and little dogs like to go exploring.	____	____
c) It is dogs and little cats that like to go exploring.	____	____
34. THE DISCOVERY OF THE ISLAND PLEASED THE KING.		
a) That the island was discovered pleased the king.	____	____
b) The king was pleased by the discovery of the island.	____	____
c) What pleased the king was the discovery of the island.	____	____
35. JOHN'S BALL BROKE THE WINDOW IN THE DOOR.		
a) The window in the door was broken by John's ball.	____	____
b) John's ball was broken by the window in the door.	____	____
c) The door by the window was broken by John's ball.	____	____
36. DAD TOOK THE BROTHERS TO WATCH BOXING.		
a) The brothers took Dad to watch boxing.	____	____
b) Boxing was what Dad took the		

	GIVES A MEANING	DOES NOT GIVE A MEANING
brothers to watch.	____	____
c) The brothers were taken by Dad to watch boxing.	____	____
37. MICHAEL'S BROTHER WATCHED THE GAME ON THE PATIO.		
a) The game on the patio was watched by Michael's brother.	____	____
b) While on the patio Michael watched his brother's game.	____	____
c) While on the patio Michael's brother watched the game.	____	____
38. MOM GAVE THE BOY MONEY FROM HER PURSE.		
a) The boy gave Mom money from her purse.	____	____
b) It was the boy who gave Mom money from her purse.	____	____
c) Mom gave money to the boy from her purse.	____	____
39. BOYS LIKE ICE CREAM BETTER THAN GIRLS.		
a) It is ice cream that boys like better than they like girls.	____	____
b) Boys like ice cream better than girls like boys.	____	____
c) Boys like ice cream better than girls like ice cream.	____	____
40. THE TEAM'S SELECTION WAS ANNOUNCED IN THE MORNING.		
a) The morning's selection was announced by the team.	____	____
b) That the team was selected was announced in the morning.	____	____
c) The selection made by the team was announced in the morning.	____	____

ITEM ANALYSIS OF THE SENTENCE INTERPRETATION TEST

Test Item No.	Sentence Type	Item Difficulty Index	Biserrial Correlation
1	6	.250	.299
2	6	.400	.334
3	3	.833	.398
4	2	.317	.541
5	4	.317	-.240
6	3	.900	.184
7	4	.567	.645
8	7	.667	.632
9	5	.433	.856
10	1	.633	-.122
11	3	.083	.065
12	7	.467	.749
13	5	.317	.525
14	8	.867	-.208
15	4	.833	-.034
16	2	.117	.227
17	5	.133	.129
18	2	.333	.679
19	5	.150	.608
20	5	.633	.896
21	3	.433	.553
22	6	.183	.654
23	7	.567	.754
24	8	.433	.062
25	4	.550	.741
26	1	.217	.622
27	1	.467	.513
28	6	.033	-.107
29	8	.800	.485
30	4	.550	.942
31	6	.083	.176
32	7	.533	.851
33	1	.117	.618
34	8	.433	.748
35	3	.583	.367
36	8	.750	.621
37	1	.400	.510
38	7	.900	.168
39	2	.383	.218
40	2	.233	.226

The following items devised by Montague replaced items of the SIT in her study.

	GIVES A MEANING	DOES NOT GIVE A MEANING
THE TRAVELLING SALESMAN ASKED HOW THE YOUNG LADY WAS.		
a) The travelling salesman was asked how the young lady was.	_____	_____
b) The travelling salesman asked how the lady who was young was.	_____	_____
c) The salesman who was travelling asked how young the lady was.	_____	_____
THE LIMB WAS TOO HIGH UP TO GRAB.		
a) The limb was too high up to be grabbed.	_____	_____
b) The limb that was grabbed was too high up.	_____	_____
c) Someone was too high up to grab the limb.	_____	_____
MOST PEOPLE WHO TRAVEL LIKE EATING SNAILS.		
a) Snails like eating most people who travel.	_____	_____
b) Most people who travel like to eat snails.	_____	_____
c) It is most people who travel that eat like snails.	_____	_____